



KINUYO TANAKA: A LIFE IN FILM

The Life of Oharu

(Saikaku ichidai onna)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

The tragic fate of women, mistreated by family, lovers and society, is a recurrent topic in Kenji Mizoguchi's filmography, and *The Life of Oharu* is one of his finest and more epic examples. Adapting a Japanese novel from the 17th century, this period drama depicts the inexorable fall of a woman in a feudal and patriarchal society, from being a young noble daughter to becoming an elderly, derelict streetwalker and beggar nun. Oharu, played by Kinuyo Tanaka at the peak of her performing career and her collaboration with Mizoguchi, suffers cruelty and injustice beyond words, losing everyone and everything that matter to her. Nevertheless, all along the way, she fights for survival and maintains her human dignity and morality against those who intend to humiliate her. Accompanying Oharu's narrative downfall, Mizoguchi's visual mastery and exquisite camerawork is at its best, skilfully creating an aesthetic experience of suffering and emotion.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández, bfi.org.uk

According to scriptwriter Yoda Yoshikata, Mizoguchi's ambitions for *The Life of Oharu* were largely stimulated by the prize accorded to Kurosawa, a relative newcomer, for *Rashomon* at Venice in 1951. The bet paid off, and *Oharu* was awarded the Silver Lion at Venice in 1952, thereby inaugurating Mizoguchi's international reputation at the age of 56, four years before his death. Differing substantially from Saikaku's novel – a looser collection of episodes narrated by an elderly nun recalling her decline from a promising youth, and ending with a scene of a prostitute entering a temple and hallucinating the faces of former lovers in the idols there – *Oharu's* script gravitates round the feudal persecutions of one woman.

It appears that Mizoguchi was something of a Stroheim on the set – requiring that the garden of Kyoto's Koetsu temple be 'rebuilt' instead of using the nearly identical original location, and firing his assistant, Seiichiro Uchikawa, when the latter complained about making last-minute changes in the positions of the studio-built houses for the scene of Bunkichi's arrest. Intransigence of this sort seems borne out by the relentless polemical thrust of *Oharu*, which quite likely comprises the most powerful feminist protest ever recorded on film. (It may not be entirely accidental that Kinuyo Tanaka, the extraordinary actress playing Oharu, went on to become the first woman director in Japan the following year.)

Eschewing the elements of fantasy and myth that figure in his subsequent period films (excepting only *Chikamatsu Monogatari*, which it resembles in other respects), *Oharu* combines the form of the picaresque novel with much of the social analysis common to Mizoguchi's 'contemporary' geisha films. Above all, it is a materialist analysis – a depiction of woman treated, traded, valued, degraded and discarded as material object: the inspection of Kyoto's 'most beautiful' women by Matsudaira's servant (delineated in one lengthy

tracking shot), periodically checking the details of his model drawing against the 'specimens' offered; the remarkable subplot of the vulgar big-spender at the Shimabara brothel, who throws fistfuls of coins to watch the courtesans fight and scramble – valuing Oharu 'highest' because she refuses to participate, and then purchasing her as a consequence – and cackling 'Money is everything', before being unveiled as a counterfeiter; the black comedy in the wealthy merchant's home about the wife's loss of her hair, her spiteful cutting of Oharu's, and Oharu's revenge of getting a kitten to make off with the former's wig.

The *obi* (sash) that Oharu's husband is clutching when he is killed is subsequently discarded in a strip tease where she 'pays' Yakichi for his material by throwing it at him, offering her body at the same time. The pagoda that she acknowledges in the final shot, visually echoing the shape of her hat, implies her equivalence to an object, while the camera remaining on the pagoda after she has left the frame – like its lingering on the ground of Kikukoji's garden after she and Katsunosuke leave on their lovers' tryst, or on a tree in the courtyard during the flight of the uncovered counterfeiter – suggests that all these things will outlast her.

The predilection of French critics for linking Mizoguchi with Murnau seems largely dictated by this sense of fatality, expressed equally by striking high-angle shots, a fairly constant use of the diagonal line, and the movement between the 'sympathy' and autonomy of several extended camera movements in relation to Oharu: her endless flight of despair through the woods after reading Katsunosuke's parting message to her; her nocturnal street walk in the opening shot – repeated near the film's close – as an axis round which things happen, which closely resembles the City Woman's walk in *Sunrise*.

But quite apart from the visual rendering of Oharu's condition and fate – a 'statement' that is made no less contemporary by the beauty and density of its period detail – one must also consider Ichiro Saito's prodigious musical score. From the solo instrument accompanying Oharu and her parents' departure from Kyoto to the percussive wooden blocks punctuating the grunts of the men carrying Matsudaira's servant there; from Oharu's discovery of an old courtesan singing in a broken voice to her later recapitulation of the same song, in comparable circumstances; from the dead silence when she sees her son passing on the road as a child to the throbbing, harp-like arpeggios that accompany her brief glimpse of him as a man – Oharu's soundtrack achieves a rare diversity of effect that never deviates from the film's sustained emotional and narrative rigour. By the time we reach the choral passage over the closing shot, we have arrived at a sublime *tabula rasa* that perfectly complements the one we see on the screen: as with the closing shots of *Queen Christina* and *Les Bonnes Femmes*, it is a coda that tells us nothing and, by doing so, expresses everything.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1975

THE LIFE OF OHARU (SAIKAKU ICHIDAI ONNA)

Director: Kenji Mizoguchi

Production Companies: Shintoho Eiga, Koi

Producer: Hideo Koi

Assistant Directors: Rychei Arai, Seiichiro Uchikawa

Screenplay: Yoda Yoshikata

Based on the novel Koshoku Ichidai Onna *by:* Ibara Saikaku

Director of Photography: Yoshimi Hirano

Lighting: Ko Fujimura

Marionettes: Monjuro Kiritake

Editor: Toshio Goto

Art Director: Hiroshi Mizutani

Music: Ichiro Saito

Shamisen Played by: Enjiro Toyosawa

Koto Played by: Masakoe Hagiwara

Dayu Joruri Accompaniment: Gendayu Takemoto

Choreography: Yachiyo Inoue

Sound: Miwa Kamiya

Art Authenticity: Isamu Yoshii

Cast

Kinuyo Tanaka (*Oharu Okui*)

Tsukie Matsuura (*Tomo, Oharu's mother*)

Ichiro Sugai (*Shinzaemon, Oharu's father*)

Toshiro Mifune (*Katsunosuke*)

Masao Shimizu (*Kikukoji*)

Eitarô Shindô (*Kahei Sasaya, dry-goods merchant*)

Sadako Sawamura (*Owasa, Sasaya's wife*)

Jukichi Uno (*Yakichi Senya, fan merchant*)

Hiroshi Oizumi (*Bunkichi, Sasaya's servant*)

Toshiaki Konoé (*Tokitaka, Lord Matsudaira*)

Hisako Yamane (*Matsudaira's wife*)

Eijiro Yanagi (*Inaka, counterfeiter*)

Daisuke Kato (*Tazaburo Hishiya*)

Toranosuke Ogawa (*Yataemon Isobei*)

Haruo Ichikawa (*Iwahashi*)

Kikue Mori (*Myokai, old nun*)

Yuriko Hamada (*Otsubone Yoshioka*)

Komako Hara (*Takai*)

Shinobu Akai (*Shigeeda*)

Yukichi Kamishiro (*Kyoemon Tashiro*)

Hiroshi Misuno (*Hisauchi Shinozaki*)

Eizaburo Sakauchi (*judge*)

Aizo Tamashima, Takashi Shimura (*old men*)

Kinnosuke Tokamatsu (*Kuya owner*)

Sumao Ishiwara (*Kuya tenant*)

Benkei Shiganoya (*Jihei, Sasaya's chief clerk*)

Yaeko Izumo (*Omoto*)

Kiyoko Hirai (*Osugi*)

Reiko Kongo (*Osen*)

Kyoko Kusajima (*Sodegaki*)

Kyoko Tsuji (*Nakayado*)

Wakako Kunitomo (*Ogiya's client*)

Junko Kinugasa (*old mendicant*)

Kimie Hayashi (*Oman of Maruya*)

Hisano Yamato (*Otama of Maruya*)

Noriko Sengoku (*Sakurai*)

Tozen Hidari (*clothes rental store owner*)

Bungakusa Mitsuwaki (*marionette troupe*)

Japan 1952

136 mins

KINUYO TANAKA: A LIFE IN FILM

Shunkinsho: Okoto to Sasuke

Fri 2 Sep 20:45; Mon 5 Sep 18:10

Army (Rikugun)

Sat 3 Sep 11:50; Fri 9 Sep 18:20

A Hen in the Wind (Kaze no naka no mendori)

Sat 10 Sep 18:20; Wed 14 Sep 20:50

The Life of Oharu (Saikaku ichidai onna)

Thu 15 Sep 18:00; Sat 24 Sep 14:30

Mother (Okaasan)

Mon 19 Sep 20:50; Sun 25 Sep 18:20

Brothel No 8 (Sandakan No. 8)

Fri 23 Sep 20:30 + Intro (guest tbc);

Sat 1 Oct 14:40

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From 26 Aug

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Bodies Bodies Bodies

From Fri 9 Sep

Crimes of the Future

From Fri 9 Sep

In Front of Your Face

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